VIETNAM

A Brief Study of the Church

in Vietnam

Willard W. Dickerson III
Ec 11
1/18/82
Dr. Moffett

VIETNAM

outline

I. Introduction.....1
II. The Catholic Church.....3
i. Early History.....3
ii. The French Period.....6
iii. Vietnamese Independence.....11
iv. Vietnam Divided.....14
v. Vietnam Reunited.....21
III. The Protestant Church.....23
i. 1911-1975.....23
ii. 1975-1982.....29
IV. Lessons and Observations.....30
V. Conclusion.....32
notes.....34
bibliography.....36

I. Introduction

Vietnam is a country with a long, complex history. Social, political and religious forces have been at work for centuries, constantly giving new faces to a culture which remains at heart Vietnamese. Any attempt to discuss religious developments, therefore, must also give consideration to the influence and power of the social and political changes. As such, a discussion of the Christian Church in Vietnam is no small task. A paper of this magnitude cannot hope to be complete; rather, instead of a detailed analysis of each stage of development, the paper must aim at giving a 'feel' for the broad sweep of history. The intent of this paper, therefore, is not to examine any one minute segment of the Vietnamese Church, but it is to give a survey of its development up to our day with the hope that the paper will provide insight and understanding into the situation the church finds itself in, and the problems it is faced with. Placed within the wider context of the Church Universal, the paper may give insight into problems which the Church is now faced with in many places, and may offer some lessons and suggestions.

While doing research for this paper I often found myself at once overjoyed by the continued and amazing triumphs of the Church, and heavy-hearted because of the tremendous price which had to be paid in lives and suffering for these gains. Perhaps there is no other place on earth where such victories have been won at such costs. It is estimated that

even before the introduction of Communism into Vietnam, over 300,000 people had given their lives for the gospel of Christ. Yet, such suffering has given the Church the strength to stand firm through civil war, French occupation, a war for independence, the splitting of the nation into North and South, and the reuniting of the country under a Communist regime. The Church in Vietnam is comprised mostly of Roman Catholics. Indeed, the Roman Catholics have been established in Vietnam for nearly 300 years, where the Protestants gained their first foothold in 1911. For the sake of clarity the paper will first discuss the development of the Roman Catholic Church, and will then turn to the developments in the Protestant Church.

With any attempt to recreate history there is a certain editing process which takes place. In a paper of this size, this editing process often cuts away much that would be desirable. In "editing" this paper I have attempted to record those events which were most significant in the development of the Church, and have tried to remain faithful to the "sense" of history found in the sources. The element which has suffered the most in this process is the socio-political context in which the Church found itself -- particularly that of the last fifty years. The socio-political situation in Vietnam is extremely complex. Often, too, I found myself at the mercy of my sources. Whereas there is much available on the early history of the Catholic Church, there is relatively little written on early Protestant development; and there is almost

nothing at all on the Church in North Vietnam (1955-1975), or on the Church in Vietnam today (1975-1982). My observations on the later period are pieced together mostly from short magazine and newspaper articles relating personal experiences, and from my discussion with two Vietnamese Catholics who escaped from Saigon in 1979.

II. The Catholic Church

i. Early History

The Roman Catholic Church in Vietnam is not the product of modern missionary work, but was well established even before the United States declared its independence in 1776. Indeed, Roman Catholic missionary work in Vietnam began seriously in the sixteenth century with some activity beginning as early as the fourteenth century. By the middle of the seventeenth century there were already 300,000 baptized persons in Vietnam. The outstanding personality of this mission work was Alexander de Rhodes, who was born in Avignon in 1591 and who arrived in Macao, headed for Japan in 1623. Japan, at that time, however, was closed to all missionaries, and Rhodes was sent to South Vietnam, where the Jesuits had been established for some eight years. Here, Rhodes quickly displayed an exceptional gift for mastering the Vietnamese language. After mastering the language, which to that point had always been written in Chinese characters, he transliterated it into Latin characters. His transliteration is still in use today. Within a short time, the Jesuits were able to print the first

Latin-Vietnamese catechism, a catechism which became an indispensible tool in subsequent mission efforts.[1]

Rhodes did not enjoy a long stay in South Vietnam, for all the missionaries were expelled in 1625. In 1627 he then entered North Vietnam, and for a time he worked in peace. The suspicion of the local ruler was aroused, however, and once again all missionaries were ejected. It is reported that during this brief stay in North Vietnam, Rhodes baptized 6,700 converts. Despite these early set-backs, the Church took quick root in the Vietnamese soil, and never ceased growing. The third opportunity for Rhodes came in 1640, when he was able to regain entry into South Vietnam. This time he worked in the capital, at that time called Sinoa. Opposition to the Church, however, was fierce, and the missionaries were constantly on the run between Sinoa and Macao. In 1645 the ruler became so violent that it was no longer possible to continue. Rhodes was banished in perpetuity; and it was decreed that any captain of a Portuguese ship who brought him back to Vietnam would lose his head. To show the seriousness of the threat, the ruler had two of the catechists arrested and publically executed.[2]

It was at this point that Rhodes took what was perhaps the most important step in ensuring the permanent establishment of the Vietnamese church. In 1648 Rhodes travelled to Rome to plead for the cause of the Indochinese missions, and for the establishment of local clergy. From Rome he then went to Paris where he helped found the Missions Etrangerés, an

institute for secular priests totally dedicated to the work of the missions with a specific goal of training native priests. It was some ten years later when the first group of French priests set sail from Marseille for Indochina. Twenty-six months later, six of the fourteen Frenchmen reached Ayuthia, the capital of Siam. Eight, including one bishop, died during the voyage.[3]

At Ayuthia they founded the first College General, the first seminary in Southeast Asia. With guidance from Rome the priests began training native youth "that they might be promoted to the priesthood and to the episcopacy." In 1688 at Ayuthia the ordination of the first four Indochinese priests took place; two priests from North Vietnam were ordained, and two from South Vietnam. The following year seven more catechists were ordained. Concerning these priests Pierro Gheddo wrote:

> Undoubtedly these were priests who had no knowledge either of scholastic philosophy, Latin, or the theological disputes that at that time so captivated European scholars; but as a compensation they were fortified with a great faith and a practical sense and were an integral part of the community of their own Christians.[4]

These priests, who existed primarily because of the insight of Rhodes, became the backbone of the Vietnamese Church. Indeed, despite continued persecution, the Church not only survived, but grew. Whereas the Church continued to depend on the missionaries, it succeeded primarily because of these native Christians who with great faith and responsibility

guided the Christian community --especially throughout the eighteenth century, when the new arrival of foreign missionaries diminished.[5]

Foreign missionaries were appreciated by the Vietnamese rulers for the scientific innovations they brought into the country and for their attempts at romanizing the Vietnamese language; they were opposed, however, in their efforts at propagating their religion, which was believed to be destructive to local society and custom.[6] Hence, the Church was constantly being persecuted. In all the countries of the Far East the Church was born amidst persecutions; yet, the persecutions in Vietnam were the longest and most cruel of any country in the East.[7] In 1851, for example, during a particularly severe persecution, at least 117 priests and 90,000 Christians were killed.[8] Indeed, the history of this early period of the Vietnamese church is the history of a continual succession of persecutions and times of relative tolerance for the faithful and the priests. In Tonkin alone (North Vietnam), violent persecutions began in 1696, 1713, 1721, 1736, 1773, 1778, etc, depending upon the emperor in power, and his tolerance of Christianity.

ii. The French Period

The ferocity of these persecutions eventually gave France cause to occupy and colonize Vietnam. Indeed, after the death of Emperor Gia-Long in 1870 the persecutions became particularly

violent. The Emperor's son, Minh-Mang, came to power, and fostered a profound mistrust toward foreigners, particularly missionaries. In 1825 he published the first edict hostile to Christianity and, in 1833, a second edict announced a general persecution. This began a systematic 'hunt for Christians' which lasted half a century until the French put a stop to it. The Emperor Tu-Duc, Minh-Mang's grandson, issued edicts in 1851 and 1855 which proclaimed that: "The European priests are to be thrown into the depths of the sea or the rivers. The Annamese priests, whether they trample on the cross or not, will be cut in two that all may know the severity of the law.[9] The hunt for Christians was given new fuel as churches were destroyed and Christian villages burned. The faithful were forced to trample on the cross, build pagodas and offer sacrifices to the idols. Under torture some revealed the hiding places of the priests and missionaries, who then suffered horrible deaths. With most of the missionaries being French the report of such cruelty, reaching Europe through the missionaries' letters, drove France to intervene.

On August 31, 1958, the port of Tourane surrendered to the French after a short bombardment from the sea, and in February of 1859 Saigon surrendered. Gradually the French moved through the land, until in 1885 their hold over Vietnam was complete. As the French advanced, however, the persecution of the Christians in the yet unconquered territories intensified. Indeed, to the hatred of Christianity - a religion which

threatened ancient traditions and the whole ancient concept of life--was added the hatred of the French. The scars of this hatred are visible in the Church even today: the Christians were not only hated as Christians, but also as allies of a foreign invader, and therefore, as traitors of their country.

The French conquerors, though, brought complete religious liberty to the Vietnamese Christians. With this respite from persecution, the Christians advanced the organization and "nationalization" of the Church. This was not a small task, for as Pierro Gheddo noted:

> Despite the persecutions of the previous century, which had given to the Church some 130,000 martyrs --of whom 125 were beatified by various successive popes--Catholics never ceased increasing in number: 310,000 in 1800, with 20 European priests and 119 native ; 420,000 in 1840, with 24 European priests and 144 native; 708,000 in 1890, with 270 European priests and 398 native; (in 1890 there were 10 vicars apostolic and one vicar coadjutor, 2886 churches or chapels). [10]

Under the French the Church became entrenched within Vietnamese society. The question must be asked, though, whether the Church gained anything more than its liberty from the French. Whereas the Church gained the right to worship and organize freely, it is doubtful whether it gained much else.

Indeed, the period of French colonization did not represent and exceptionally prosperous period of Church growth. Under the French, the Church experienced almost the same rate of increase as it did in the previous half-century during the

persecutions: 1840, 420,000 baptized; 1890, 708,000 baptized; 1833, 1,165,000 baptized, 1941, 1,638,000 baptized. Whereas people were free to live as Christians and to propagate their faith, Christianity had become associated with colonial domination, and therefore was considered a foreign religion. During the period of persecution, on the other hand, the Christian community was revolutionary with respect to the extablished authority, and it proclaimed a very liberating message; the courage of the priests and the Christians under torture further increased the admiration of the pagans and their fascination with a religion capable of producing such heroism.[11] The fact that the Church obtained freedom of worship as a result of the intervention of foreigners was long a sore spot for Vietnamese Catholics, who were accused by their fellow countrymen of being "serfs of the French" and members of a "Foreign Religion" [12]

The Church did not even get any support from the French themselves. Although the French used the persecution of missionaries as a pretext for invading Vietnam, once they were in possession of the country they hardly acknowledged the existence of the Church. France, as ~~they~~ did elsewhere, followed a policy of assisting the local religions as a means of subduing the natives. In Vietnam the support of the government and colonial dignitaries - mostly freemasons and anticlericals-always went to Buddhism, which was considered to be the only organized religion of the country. Indeed, in 1932, at a meeting of the International Institute, the French delegate, speaking on the policy in Indochina, stated: "it is impossible to count on Christianity, whatever its intrinsic

value, to give these populations a morality or an effective rule of life. Christianity says nothing to them. Therefore, the government policy consists in ignoring the Catholic mission and intensely favoring Buddism which has great intrinsic value, and is further more perfectly adapted to the native mentality and tradition."[13]

Despite the cold shoulder from the French, and the animosity of many of the natives, the Church grew under the colonial regime, and managed two major accomplishments. During this period, the development of the local clergy was of utmost concern to the Church. Indeed, the results were rather impressive. Since the "jungle seminaries" of the persecution days, in 1941 there were eight major and some twenty minor seminaries, with 482 clerics and 1,298 seminarians. By that year there were, in Vietnam, 1,406 native priests and 340 foreign; 74 native religious priests; 635 native nonpriest religious and 45 foreign; 4,684 native sisters and 371 foreign; 2,956 native catechists. At the beginning of the Second World War, Vietnam also had three native bishops, and the first, Mgr. Nguyen-Ba-Tong of Phat Diem, was consecrated in 1933.[14] The Church had progressed so far in training its own leaders that one commentator remarked that Mgr. Nguyen's consecration marked "the beginning of the end of the missionary period."[15]

The other great accomplishment of the Church during this period was its extension of its influence throughout the

whole country. With the inauguration of new missions, particularly on the central plateaux, the Church reached out into the various geographical regionsof Vietnam. It was particularly successful in its evangelization of the Montagnards, the primative mountain tribes. Vietnamese Christianity, however, although very fervent and increasingly well organized, remained composed almost entirely of poor country folk and tribal peoples. The Church had yet to make an impact on the upper classes.

iii. Vietnamese Independence

While the Church was attempting to organize and expand, the French increasingly were having to fight to maintain their control. The colonial regime was very unpopular, and several popular and guerrilla organizations emerged in opposition to it. In the political realm there was much maneuvering and violence as the various organizations vied for power. With the onset of World War II, France's authority in Vietnam was greatly weakened, and the power struggle intensified. The Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, emerged victorious. When the Japanese were finally defeated on August 15, 1945, the Viet Minh controlled almost all of Vietnam without any opposition and with the great support of the people. On August 29, Ho Chi Minh founded the first national government and on September 2, he declared the country's independence.

The Catholics--numbering 1,600,000 or 18 percent of the whole Vietnamese population, and the most active and organized

group--supported the Viet Minh en masse. Indeed, the Catholics through their support of Ho Chi Minh, seemed to be declaring their patriotism before their countrymen and before the world. At this time, relations between the Viet Minh government and Catholics were of the best. The Vietnamese bishops -- four at the time -- in addition to sponsoring demonstrations on behalf of the government, wrote two collective letters to Pope Pius XII and to Christians of the whole world asking for their support in the struggle for independence.

France, however, was unwilling to concede Vietnam's independence, and a long, devastating war ensued. The struggle for power within Vietnam once again intensified as various organizations sought to fill the position once held by France. As the war with France waged on, the Catholic Church and the Viet Minh gradually parted company, and eventually found themselves opposed to one another. The Catholic Church condemned the terrorists tactics and the brutality which the Viet Minh were using against their own countrymen, as well as the dialectical materialism of their Marxist-Leninist ideology. Indeed, the communist Viet Minh "systematically and scientifically" eliminated most of the non-communist patriots, and would have eliminated all of them if they had had the opportunity. While they let the French and the non-communists fight one another, the Viet Minh sought to obtain a monopoly of leadership through persuasion and force. When the French left, they intended to be the only political power in Vietnam. This led to the inevitable collision of Catholic and communist, and the resulting violence. The Catholics, like the other parties,

became the target of Viet Minh attacks and terrorist activity.

The end of the long war for independence came with the Geneva agreements of May-July 1954, following the decisive victory of the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. It was at this time that Vietnam was partitioned at the 17th parallel into North and South Vietnam. The stipulation was made in this agreement that the people would have one year in which they could move freely to the North or to the South. As a result of this stipulation, between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people, 600,000-700,000 of whom were Catholic and 20,000 of whom were Protestant, moved from North to South Vietnam.[17] This exodus from the north served as a tremendous slap in the face to the communists, coming as it did from the Viet Minh's old ally. The Christians,having lived under the Viet Minh for a period of time, wanted no further part of it. Indeed, if the communists had been true to the agreement, and had allowed real freedom of movement, most observers believe these numbers would have been even higher. As Pierro Gheddo wrote:

> Various commentators are of the opinion that if there had been absolute freedom for chosing for the South -- and the concrete possibility of really getting there -- the refugees from the North would have been several millions and not only the million that succeeded in reaching their destination before June 21, 1955. After this date, however, others did flee the North, especially the fishermen from the southern coasts of North Vietnam and the Montagnard tribes from the central plateaus. It is difficult to say how many refugees there have been since 1955. The most common estimates, in South Vietnam, are in the hundreds of thousands, which refer to the period between 1956 and 1964.[18]

Despite the fact that Ho Chi Minh "extended his hand" to the Christians on several occasions during this period, and despite

the fact that he guaranteed religious freedom, the great number of Christians thought it more prudent to judge the communists by their actions, and not by their words. After living with, and observing, the communists for so long, many opted for the South.

iv. Vietnam Divided

It was predicted that once North Vietnam was closed off, the communists would begin the systematic execution of all Catholics. Such a frontal attack, however, never occurred. Rather, the North Vietnamese government chose more subtle means of cutting into church membership. This is not to say that open persecution did not exist. Indeed, in Vinh Catholics were accused of being "hindrances to the historical progress of Marxism," people who were rotten in spirit and heart, and people who were in need of re-education. Following these accusations, many Catholics were sent to re-education camps, from which some never returned. It is known that over 800 Catholics from Vinh were deported to these camps.[19]

For the most part, the North Vietnamese chose to tolerate the Catholic Church until such a time as it could be quietly strangled. They went to great lengths to give the appearance of benevolent and generous government, yet they carried on a systematic seige against the Catholics. The decree on religious questions, issued in 1955, gave every appearance of religious liberty and toleration. A closer look, however, is very revealing of the spirit which guided the rulers of North Vietnam.

First of all, religious liberty is declared , along with the right of the priests to preach in church. This liberty, though, is allowed only within the church. The state also reserves the right to proscribe to the priests the subjects on which they are to preach: "While preaching religion, the ministers of the various cults are also under the obligation to inculcate into the minds of the faithful patriotism, the sense of civic duties, respect for the democratic authorities and for the people's Republic" (art.1, par.3). The decree is careful to announce the principles which, in given cases, can (as in China) be used as a pretext for action against the clergy and the believers: "The law will take penal action against anyone, who under the pretext of religion shall attack peace, unity, independence and democracy, shall engage in propaganda on behalf of war, or shall attack the liberty or the ideas of any other person."[20]

Rather than opting for open persecution, the North Vietnamese regime sought to create a "patriotic church", cut off from the rest of the world, in order "to wage from inside an attack against the faith of the Catholics."[21] The government quickly severed the communications between the Church and Rome, and began compelling all foreign missionaries, on one pretext or another, to leave the country. The last, a French Dominican, Fr. Léna, left in 1960.[22] The government also seized all Catholic schools, and most of the charitable institutions. Evangelism, for all intents, was made illegal. It became increasingly difficult for younger people to become Christians, both because of the pressure that would be brought to bear against them, and because it became increasingly

difficult to hear the Gospel. Those who passively accepted the mandates of the communist regime were allowed to practice their religion quietly, but those who showed any signs of disapproval were quickly deemed "reactionary", and were selected for re-education.

In this way, by cutting off communication with the outside, by taking away the Church's means of outreach, and by actively discouraging the youth, the North Vietnamese government sought to strangle the Church over the course of a generation. Under this regime, news from the Church in North Vietnam became very sporadic. Yet, from the various reports it appears that the Catholics withstood the pressure of the state and party remarkably well. Indeed, the simple fact of their continuing existence is itself remarkable when it is noted that all other religions have ceased functioning, except as organisms of the state.[23] The Church not only survived in North Vietnam, but actually experienced a modest renewal, with an inward deepening of the faith and a more lively sense of Church community.[24] After ten years of communist rule the Catholic Church could still claim in 1964 -- the last year for which such figures are available -- 12 bishops, 323 priests, 626 parishes, 833,468 Catholics, and 5.6% of the population.[25] Twelve years later, in 1976, after a series of negotiations between the Vatican and the Hanoi government, Trin Nhu Khue, the Archbishop of Hanoi, was consecrated as a cardinal by Pope Paul VI.[26] The Church, despite tremndous adversity, has continued to survive, and has even made modest gains.

Unlike their brethren in the North, who were under constant

pressure, the Catholics in South Vietnam enjoyed a love-hate relationship with their government. Indeed, there were several political forces in the South, and each, to a certain degree, wanted a share of the power. As the war with the North intensified, so did the intrigue and manoeuvring in Saigon. Depending on who was in power the Catholics either enjoyed a favored position, were ignored, or served as the public scapegoat. For the most part, the Southern Catholics were free to worships as Christians; although, they did experience some persecution. The first president of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, in fact, was a very devout Catholic.

Diem's presidency seemed to have three effects on the Catholic Church. First of all, the Church unofficially enjoyed a "favored" position during his regime, much like the Roman Church under Constantine the Great. Secondly, the popularity of the Church went up or down with Diem's popularity. At the outset Diem was very popular, but his popularity quickly declined, and he was eventually assasinated during a coup. Finally, under Diem's regime, Catholic clergy increasingly became involved in the political realm. Some even accused the Church of trying to control the country. Diem, however, kept the clergy at arm's distance. Although Diem was a Catholic, he made no attempt to "Catholicize" South Vietnam. Diem was primarily "anti-communist", and if South Vietnam could be said to have had a state religion, it could only have been anti-communism.

Under the Diem regime, the Vietnamese Church was able to

work zealously for the missionary spread of the faith and for the development of Catholic institutions of training and charity. Indeed, during this time the number of new conversions assumed extraordinary proportions. It is possible that some of these conversions were for ulterior motives, yet most of these converts remained faithful. As Pierro Gheddo noted:

> Undoubtedly, part of the appeal exerted by the Church at this time with the Christians was attributed to the prestige of the Catholic community as a result of the Catholic president and a successful regime cheifly supported by Catholics, and also, perhaps, precisely on account of "triumphalism", which for simple folk constituted a forceful element of appeal. We must immediately add, however, that if the initial reasons for this burst of faith were not always completely spiritual, the new Christians immediately proved the strength of their faith in the following years, when the Catholics passed some very difficult times after the fall of Diem.[27]

Indeed, a great number of testimonies point not to political expediency as the primary cause of conversion, but to the widespread experience of suffering and tradgedy. As one observer noted:

> Experience has taught non-Christians that for those who are unhappy, 'the faith is a solid support along life's road.' It is the Communists themselves, contrary to the aim they pursue, who have helped the people to wake up from their sluggishness. Those unfortunates who had been subject to the persecutions of such a cruel regime experienced its horrors and set out to search for truth. The non-Christian understood that amoung religions only Christianity does not change, despite persecutions; they compare its stability to the opportunism of their religions, like Cao-Dai and Hoa-Hao, who change their doctrine according to what happens.[28]

Even with the outbreak of the guerilla war, the conversions did not diminish. Indeed, the conversion movement did not stop

until the early sixties. By 1964 the South Vietnamese church could claim 1,430,000 Catholic believers, 1,227 priests (amoung them 160 foreign missionaries), and 13 bishops (1 foreigner).[29]

By the time Diem's government collapsed in 1963, the South Vietnamese church represented a substantial force within society. The church had even established its own indigenous hierarchy, and had virtually made the transition from a missionary regime to an ordinary Church regime.[30] Amoung the most important accomplishments of the Diem period was the establishment of the national pontifical seminary of Dalat, with its theological faculty, the two major regional seminaries of Saigon and Hué, and the reconstruction in the South of several minor seminaries filled with refugees from the North. Religious enthusiasm abounded, so much so that there was even talk of founding a national missionary institute for the Vietnamese clergy, with the purpose of sending priests to other Asian countries and to Africa. Although the project was never carried out, it indicates the maturity the Vietnamese attained during this period.[31]

When the Diem regime fell, the Catholic Church quickly found itself being used as a scapegoat. Hence, it went through a difficult period of persecution. Despite this, Diem's fall had many positve effects on the Church. Under the influence of Vatican II, the Church moved away from its involvement in the political sphere, and it experienced "a renewal of a more genuine religious spirit."[32] During this period, the Church emphasized a deepening of one's personal faith, a greater

knowledge of the Scriptures, and better religious training. To the extent that Vietnamese Catholics were preoccupied with ceremony and religious externals, the Church sought to encourage spiritual depth. The Church also tried to break down the Christian ghetto, or "secret clan", mentality of many Catholics; as well as promote a non-defensive posture on the part of Christians. Rather than hiding within Christian communities, the Church encouraged believers to integrate themselves in society so that they might reach out to non-believers as effective witnesses of the Gospel. To a certain degree the Church acheived some success, but the mounting socio-political pressures tended to blunt the Church's efforts. Not only were the Christians often used as public scapegoats, but the war with the North was intensifying and the threat of communism was becoming ever greater. So too, the moral fiber of the Vietnamese, with the influx of American military forces, began to decay rapidly -- particularly in the cities. As much as the Church feared the communists, it was also threatened by the war morality of its own people.

During this period, the Catholic Church deepened its inner strength, and it sunk its roots deeper into Vietnamese society. Indeed, despite the anti-Catholic feelings and the degenerating morality, the Church continued to register modest gains. By 1967 there were over 1,700,000 Catholics in South Vietnam, which represented 13% of the population. As the war became more savage and the suffering increased, the Church served as a haven for weary and tormented souls. In this way, the Church continued up until the fall of Saigon in 1975. While its greatest

weakness continued to be its "ghetto" mentality, and it tended to react to communism more out of fear than Christian concern, the South Vietnamese church yet displayed great inner strength amidst growing chaos; it provided a certain stability in an increasingly unstable situation, and it offered rest to embattled souls.

v. Vietnam Reunited

With the communists' victory of April 30, 1975, Vietnam was once again united under one government. The policies which the northern Christians had been subject to now became the policies which the southern Christians had to abide by. Apart from well founded rumors of mass executions in certain camps, there was no blood bath. There was no forthright attempt to exterminate the Church; rather, the Hanoi government used its old methods of isolation and re-education. As one observer commented:

> One has the impression that a slow process of strangulation is going on -- very dispassionate, very well-intentioned, and,apparently, very "civilized".[33]

The new regime, it seems, in order to further encourage the quiet death of the Church, introduced a "patriotic" substitute, the cult of "Uncle Ho".

Most Vietnamese respect and are proud of Uncle Ho, a great and true patriot. Those who oppose the Marxist-Leninist ideology and government regret Uncle Ho's decision to identify national

independence and national dignity with Marxism-Leninism, an imported ideology which has nothing in common with the national culture.[34] The cult of Uncle Ho is strongly promoted, particularly amoung the youth. Obedience to Uncle Ho is more important than obedience to parents, because he is the embodiment of the nation and the party. His picture towers over buildings and offices, and is present at all gatherings and ceremonies. He is honored in almost liturgical rites.[35] The image of Ho Chi Minh is used and venerated in almost the same way as Catholics respect the crucifix or madonna. Church leaders who object to the cult of Uncle Ho are deemed "unpatriotic", and are prime candidates for re-education. The clergy are constantly reminded that they "were involved in politics" because they condoned the status quo, and they neglected to protest the injustices of the old regime. Their revolutionary spirit and patriotism are constantly called into question.[36]

Despite such obstacles and opposition, the Vietnamese church seems to be standing firm. As the consecration of Cardinal Trin Nhu Khue displayed, the Church is still taking steps forward under the Hanoi regime. In the south there was even a spiritual renewal with the advent of the new regime. Considering the fact that the Catholic Church was viewed as a reactionary organization by the government, this was quite astounding. The expectation would be that people would drift away from the Church, rather than toward it. The people, however, showed a greater attachment to the Church than ever before.[37] This renewal was observed in a number of ways: larger attendance at religious ceremonies, a larger number of people attending religious and theological

classes for lay people; and the tremendous growth of the charasmatic movement.[38]

In recent years very little information has come out of Vietnam with respect to the Church. Even now, not all the dust has settled from the reuniting of the country in 1975. It is hard to say just how the Church is faring today. History seems to suggest that the Church is holding its own, despite pressure. Some who have recently escaped from Saigon, however, say that the government, now that it is in firm control of the whole land, is stepping up its persecution of the Christians, and is doing so more boldly. The Catholic Church, for its part, has great inner strength and, at this point, is very much a part of Vietnamese culture. Indeed, the Church was born amidst persecutions, and grew up in the face of them. More dust, though, must settle before we can see what direction the Church is heading in from here.

III. The Protestant Church

i. 1911-1975

To this point, the attention has been focused strictly on the Catholic Church. The Catholics, however, although the largest and strongest body of Christians in Vietnam, is not the only body. The Protestants first entered the country in 1911, after having tried unsuccessfully for several years. The French authorities, at that time, were hesitant to allow foreign, Protestant missionaries into Indochina. In the spring of 1911, R.A. Jaffray, Paul M. Hosler, and Lloyd Hughes of the Christian and Missionary Alliance arrived at the port of Tourane. There they purchased what would later

serve as the CMA's headquarters in Annam (Central Vietnam). Later that year Mr. Hosler returned to Tourane alone to begin the study of the Annamese (Vietnamese) language.[39] From this point, the CMA mission began to expand rapidly.

By 1915 the missionary staff had been increased to nine, and a new station had been opened south of Tourane at Faifoo. An Annamese Field Conference was then organized, and the former head of the mission in South China was appointed as Superintendent. At that point, the decision was made to further divide the missionary force. Four remained in the State of Annam to continue the work in Tourane and Faifoo, and the other five were sent north to Tonkin. There they opened up stations in Haiphong and in the capital city of Hanoi.[40] The missionaries, however, suffered at minor setback. The French, at this time, were concerned with the war in Europe, and they distrusted the foreign missionaries. The result was that in December 1915 a decree was issued by the French government prohibiting any further work by the missionaries amoung the natives; the chapels were closed, and the missionaries with German sounding names were expelled. Thus, the group of nine was reduced to five, who were refused authorization to do any work amoung the Vietnamese.[41]

In the spring of 1916, Mr. Jaffray returned to Vietnam and obtained an interview with the French officials. After some discussion the missionaries were once again given authorization to work in certain designated cities. In Tonkin the work then progressed rapidly. In Hanoi, through a miraculous chain of events, the missionaries were able to aquire a choice piece of

property in the heart of the city. A press was opened there, and the missionaries, in addition to their preaching, began translating the Bible into Annamese. The Hanoi press became a key part of the CMA mission.[42] The British and Foreign Bible Society subsequently added its support to the CMA's efforts. It paid the translator's salary, and later assumed the entire cost of printing and distributing the Scriptures. The missionaries printed volumes of literature in Hanoi, including several editions of the Bible and numerous portions of the Bible. The literature had a wide distribution and was sold for a very low price. It was the experience of the missionaries that that which people pay something for is valued more and taken more seriously than that which is received for free. This printed material proved most helpful in the establishment of a new church.[43]

In Haiphong, a group of expatriated Chinese, who had been Christians before leaving China for Tonkin, joined with a few Vietnamese who had become Christians, and they formed the nucleus of the Haiphong church. A couple years later a missionary couple was permanently stationed in Haiphong to oversee the work, and Haiphong was made the regional headquarters.[44]

The churches in Tourane (Annam) also grew rapidly. Within three months the missionaries had baptized eighteen converts. Amoung these early converts were four members of the Annamese royal family, three Annamese customs officals, and three secretaries employed in the main office of the French government's railroad. Whereas the Catholic Church drew almost entirely from the poorer

people, the Protestants often appealed to the more influential people. The first church in Annam expanded quickly. Its membership doubled every year for a number of years, until there were over a thousand members in the Tourane church and its outstations.[45]

The new converts to Christianity read about the miracles in the Bible, and fully expected to see such manifestations of divine power on their behalf. Often they received them. As one missionary wrote:

> Miracles similar to those recorded in the Book of Acts were enacted before our eyes, not because of the faith of the missionaries, but because of the faith of these 'babes in Christ' who expected from their newly-found savior greater power than they had thought belonged to their old enemy the devil.[46]

Scores of new converts were first attracted to the church because they witnessed such evidences of the Lord's presence and power. Miracles drew many to the church, who were then baptized, and who matured in their faith.

As the early churches began to grow, the missionaries were anxious to begin spreading out through the country. At first it seemed impossible, for the French restricted their work to a few authorized cities. The Church, however, began spreading by itself. In most cases, an influential person from a 'closed' region would travel to a city, and there would encounter Christ through the Church. Upon hearing the Gospel, the person would receive Christ, and would return home to spread the Good News.

The influence which the person had would usually effect a favorable response to the Gospel back in the 'closed' region. This proved to be the pattern followed on numerous occasions.[47] Indeed, before the greater part of Annam was opened to the Protestants, eight churches and several chapels had already been established, with over two thousand Vietnamese Christians.

In Cochin-China, the southern region of Vietnam, the Church ran into greater opposition than it did in Tonkin or Annam. Yet, here the Church would eventually become the strongest. In Cochin-China the Gospel was known as the American religion, and stories were circulated to the effect that whoever would accept Christ would be given twenty dollars, and would be sent to an American school.[48] Nevertheless, The Protestant Church did establish itself and grow in the south. Like the churches of Tonkin and Annam, the church of Cochin-China grew largely through the conversions of key people. Such was the case at Mytho. A certain wealthy person became a Christian and decided to give large amounts of his money for the Lord's work. Others, then, followed his example. Within a short time this body erected the first Vietnamese-built church in Cochin-China. Within fifteen years this church had grown into ten churches, with over a thousand members. Each church had its own building and was financially independent of the Mission.[49]

The growth of the CMA mission in Vietnam was rapid. When A.C. Snead, the Foreign Secretary of the Mission Society, visited Vietnam in 1927, just fourteen years after the opening of the

first chapel, a national church had already been organized, with more than 5,000 members scattered through the various congregations.[50] Perhaps the most tangible element of their success was their Bible School at Tourane. It was realized that, all things being equal, converts were made much more quickly through the witnessing of native Christians. By the end of 1935, more than 300 men and women had been trained at the Bible School, 230 of whom were directly engaged in Christian work.[51]

The CMA moved very quickly to train native pastors, and to establish a National Church. This, in fact, seems to have given great strength and credibility to the newly formed body. Indeed, the year that the first class graduated from the Tourane Bible School was the year the National Church was organized. Although the missionary continued to play a critical role after this organization, the role took on a new character. The missionary no longer travelled from place to place alone, making contacts, preaching the Word, and selling Scriptures. Rather, the missionary began to work hand in hand with the local pastor. The authority of the native church increased, while that of the missionary decreased. In addition to evangelization, the goal of the new church became the establishment of a self-supporting, self-administeri and self-propagating Vietnamese church with a congregation in every community. The missionary became primarily an advisor and a spiritual leader of the native pastors, while the executive authority was transferred to the Vietnamese people.[52]

By 1935, there were 30 ordained Vietnamese pastors and 85 unordained preachers and evangelists serving the National Church.

Most of them were married men whose wives had also received Bible training. All the congregations of Cochin-China were self-supporting, and seventeen others in Tonkin and Annam had also reached that stage, making a total of 63 congregations which had full membership in the national body.

The National Church, or Evangelical Church (Tin Lanh), of Vietnam continued to grow at an increasing rate right up to 1975. Indeed, from 1972 to 1975 it had been riding a wave of revival. A great majority of the Vietnamese Protestants belong to the Evangelical Church, which in 1975 claimed 490 congregations and more than 500 national workers, with more than 53,000 baptized members.[53] The CMA, at that time, had 93 missionaries in Vietnam, and maintained its Bible School in Nha Trang. The Bible School maintained an enrollment of about 200.[54] The other major Protestant groups in Vietnam were: the Wycliffe translators, who also had a school at Nha Trang, and who were working on 20 language projects; the Southern Baptist Convention, which had 36 missionaries; and the United World Mission and Worldwide Evangelism Crusade, who together had 11 missionaries.[55] (World Vision was also in Vietnam operating a relief service.)

ii. 1975-1982

Since the reunification of Vietnam, religious activity has been discouraged. Before 1975 the Evangelical Church was geared toward public evangelism. The end of the war, however, brought a finish to this. Public and mass evangelism is no longer

permitted for church members. The practice of organized religion, in fact, is generally limited to worship services. Church leaders must get governmental permission even to conduct regular services. Permission to hold such special programs as an annual conference requires a tremendous amount of time and energy, and is seldom obtained. Further, pastors must be very careful what they say in their sermons: one minister was arrested because he mentioned that in the Second Coming "Russia would be destroyed."[56]

Protestants, like their Catholic brethren, are continually deemed "unpatriotic", and are constantly asked to prove their loyalty to the state and party.[57] Indeed, the tact which the communists have taken toward the Protestants is almost identical to that taken toward the Catholics. The attack on the Church is rarely frontal, but primarily consists of isolation, re-education, and the establishment of "patriotic" substitutes. By cutting off the two legs ofevangelism and social service, the government hopes to limit the Churches movement.[58] Like the Catholic Church, however, the Protestants have shown a certain resilience. In 1975, for instance, after twenty years under communist rule, the North Vietnamese could boast a Vietnamese Protestant Association, which had forty churches, twenty-six pastors, and 10,000 members.[59]

IV. Lessons and Observations

Although it remains to be seen how the Body of Christ will fare in the reunited Vietnam, to this point it has shown amazing strength. Whereas the persecution suffered under the communist regime has not been as savage as earlier persecutions, it has

been more subtle and insidious; it has been a much more calculated persecution. Yet, the Church has stood its ground, and at times has shown slight gains. This is a particularly noteworthy accomplishment, considering that all other religions in Vietnam have ceased functioning, except as vassals of the state. Besides the supernatural element, the strength of both Catholic and Protestant Churches seems to be the result of the early development of indigenous leadership. The communist attempt to isolate the Christians from the rest of the world was not as effective as it was in other countries; for the Vietnamese churches were already relatively self-sufficient and independent of foreign aid. Both Churches had strong national leadership, and a well-developed, tightly run organization. The Church, in fact, had a firmer hold in the culture than did the communist ideology. Government attempts to infiltrate or dismantle the churches, to this date, have proved largely inneffectual. What the communists have accomplished, though, is that they have stunted the Church's growth. If the Church is to survive past this generation, it must continue to draw new converts, and train them up in the ways of the Church.

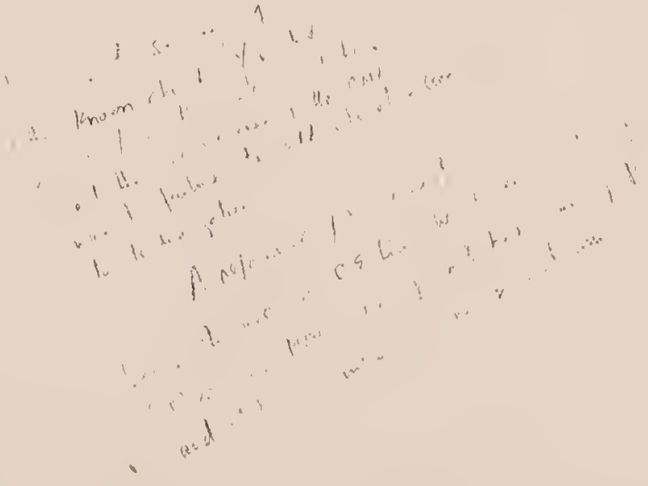
Despite the strengths and accomplishments of the Church, however, it does have its weaknesses. Indeed, both Catholics and Protestants seem to share the same weaknesses. First of all, there is the tendency on the part of Vietnamese Christians to react to communists out of fear or hate, rather than responding out of Christian compassion. Certainly they have been given ample cause to fear the communists. They,more than anyone, know what it is like to

live under communist rule. Yet, these Christians, who have been so mission oriented, suddenly become defensive when confronted by communism. Although I certainly can find no fault in the Vietnamese Church for its actions, defensive Christianity seldom makes any impact on the world. As Pierro Gheddo remarked: "Nothing is more disastrous than to act under fear, and to consent to an evil even when one knows it is an evil; one agrees to this out of fear or something worse, but the 'worst' ends up by becoming inevitable in a more or less short period of time." Certainly the Christians have reason to fear the communists -- the early Christians had reason to fear the Romans -- and few will fault them for reacting defensively. One wonders, though, if the results might not be changed by an "offensive" approach -- to the degree that such is possible. The second weakness of the Vietnamese Churches is their attitudes toward one another. Both Catholic and Evangelical regard themselves as "the" Church in Vietnam; and both, for the most part, ignore each other. Both churches have displayed tremendous inner strength throughout their histories, and especially in these last few years. Again, one wonders if this strength would gain a new dimension if there was even a little co-operation amoung the brethren. This mutual diffidence is not terribly surprising, for neither the Roman Catholic Church, nor the CMA have been quick to acknowledge the other's virtues. There remains a theological gap between these two bodies, which even the persecution has not been able to close.

V. Conclusion

The Vietnamese Church throughout its history has given us stirring examples of courage amidst conflict. Indeed, it is one

of the grandest success stories amoung "third world" churches; yet, the Vietnamese Christians continue to live through relentless persecution. The Church offers us many lessons of how a strong church ought to be built, while displaying only the most human of errors. We ought to examine the Vietnamese Church, study it, and learn from it and from those who gave their life for its higher cause. Most of all, though, we ought to pray for it. As our brethren continue to undergo physical and mental torment, we ought not forget that they are a part of us, and we a part of them. The Vietnamese Church offers us many lessons, but they are not simply "academic" lessons; rather, they are lessons which must be lived within the context of Christ's Body, and an active Christian life.



notes

1. see René De Roeck, "Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos: The Church at the Crossroads of Chaos", in Christ and Crises in Southeast Asia, ed., Gerald H. Anderson, (New York: Friendship Press, 1968), p. 58; and Stephen Neill, A History of Christian Missions, (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 195.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. see Pierro Gheddo, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1970), pp. 4-5.
5. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
6. Ibid.,p. 6.
7. Ibid., p. 3.
8. see De Roeck, p. 58.
9. see Gheddo, pp. 11-12.
10. Ibid., p. 13.
11. Ibid., pp. 15-16.
12. Ibid., p. 23.
13. Ibid., p. 17.
14. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
15. De Roeck, p. 58.
16. Gheddo, p. 19.
17. see De Roeck, p. 58; and Gheddo p. 58.
18. Gheddo, p. 66.
19. Ibid., pp. 84-85.
20. De Roeck, p. 62.
21. Gheddo, p. 85.
22. De Roeck, p. 59.
23. Gheddo, pp. 91-92.
24. Ibid., p. 92.
25. De Roeck, p. 59; and Gheddo p. 93.
26. see "Of Many Things", America, 134: inside cover, June 12, 1976.
27. Gheddo, p. 148.
28. Ibid., p.149
29. De Roeck, p. 59.
30. De Roeck, pp. 59-60; and Gheddo, p. 152.
31. Gheddo, p. 153.
32. Ibid., p. 211.
33. Sesto Quercetti, "The Vietnam Church: Conflict and Courage", America, 135:138-143, September 18, 1976, p. 139.
34. Ibid., p. 140
35. Ibid.
36. "Vietnam Update", Christianity Today, 23:68-69, November 3, 1978, p.69.
37. Quercetti, p. 142.
38. Ibid.
39. E.F. Irwin, With Christ in Indo-China, (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., 1938), pp. 27-28.
40. Ibid., p. 30
41. Ibid., p. 32
42. Ibid., p. 34.
43. Ibid., pp. 36-37.

44. Ibid., p. 37.
45. Ibid., pp. 41-42.
46. Ibid., pp. 48ff.
47. Ibid., pp. 53ff.
48. Ibid., p. 69.
49. Ibid., pp.71-72.
50. Ibid., p. 85
51. Ibid., pp. 85-91.
52. Ibid., p. 93.
53. "Suffering in South Vietnam", Christianity Today, 19:31-33, April 11, 1975, p. 33.
54. Ibid., pp. 32-33.
55. Ibid.
56. "Vietnam Update", p.68.
57. Ibid., pp. 68-69.
58. "Behind the Lines in North Vietnam", Christianity Today, 19:34-35, April 11, 1975, p.35.
59. Ibid., p. 34.

bibliography

"Behind the Lines in North Vietnam", Christianity Today, 19:34-35, April 11, 1975.

De Roeck, René, "Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos: The Church at the Crossroads of Chaos", in Christ and Crises in Southeast Asia, ed., Gerald H. Anderson, Friendship Press: New York, 1968.

Dournes, Jacques, God in Vietnam, Geoffrey Chapman: London, 1966.

Dowdy, Homer E., The Bamboo Cross, Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1964.

Gheddo, Pierro, The Cross and the Bo-Tree, Sheed and Ward: New York, 1970.

Haas, Harry and Nguyen Bao Cong, Vietnam: The Other Conflict, Sheed and Ward: London, 1971.

Hefley, James C., By Life or by Death, Zondervan Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1969.

_____, No Time for Tombstones, Tyndale House: Wheaton, 1974.

Irwin, E.F., With Christ in Indo-China, Christian Publications, Inc.: Harrisburg, 1938.

Neill, Stephen, A History of Christian Missions, Penguin Books: New York, 1964.

"Of Many Things", America, 134: inside cover, June 12, 1976.

Quercetti, Sesto, "The Vietnam Church: Conflict and Courage", America, 135:138-143, September 18, 1976.

"Suffering in South Viet Nam", Christianity Today, 19:31-33, April 11, 1975.

"Vietnam Update", Christianity Today, 23:68-69, November 3, 1978.